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**Godly exercises or the devil's dance?
Puritanism and Popular Culture
in pre-Civil War England**

by Jeremy Goring

**DR. WILLIAMS'S TRUST
14 GORDON SQUARE
LONDON WC1H 0AG**

FOREWORD

The 'Friends of Dr. Williams's Library' was founded in November 1946, and inaugurated a series of lectures, of which this is the thirty-seventh, to promote interest in, and support for, the Library. This lecture was delivered on 11 October 1983.

The lecture in 1984 will be given by Rabbi Louis Jacobs. His subject is: *Symbols for the Divine in the Kabbalah*.

Details of earlier lectures in this series and of publications by Dr. Williams's Library are in the *Bulletin of Dr. Williams's Library* published annually, price 50p, and obtainable from Dr. Williams's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0AG.

Theology Library

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On 14 May 1572 a violent incident occurred at Warbleton, a parish in the Sussex Weald. At about 11 o'clock at night a man was shot in the neck and killed as he and a number of others were attempting to take away a maypole standing on a green.¹ The records provide no clear indication as to the motives of those who took part in this affray. Why did some people wish to take the maypole away? Why did others react with such violence? When I first came across the case I concluded rather hastily that this was an early example of a clash between the new energies of puritanism and the old popular culture of the countryside. Both the time and the place of the incident seemed to point in that direction. The year 1572 I knew to be one of great puritan activity: it saw the publication of two *Admonitions to Parliament*, the first of which condemned 'heathenish dancing' while the second demanded that the clergy should 'suffer no lewd customs to remain in their parish, either in games or otherwise'.² At Warbleton, the place where the maypole was not suffered to remain, the newly arrived rector was a puritan, William Hopkinson: at the time he was serving as commissary in the archdeaconry of Lewes for the reforming Bishop Curteys and was actively engaged in the extirpation of popish practices.³ Could he have been the instigator of a campaign to suppress the popular festivities associated with the old religion? And if so, where better to begin than in his own parish?

My speculations were doubtless influenced consciously or unconsciously by the view of puritanism that I had acquired as a schoolboy when I was encouraged to read Macaulay's *History of England*. Puritans, according to Macaulay, were distinguished by their dislike of drinking, dicing, dancing and other popular pastimes: for them 'it was a sin to hang garlands on a maypole, to drink a friend's health, to fly a hawk, to hunt a stag, to play at chess, to wear lovelocks . . .'.⁴ Macaulay's great-nephew G. M. Trevelyan, although more sympathetic to the puritans, also emphasised their antipathy towards folk festivities. Puritans, he wrote, 'had no tolerance for the public feasts and village merry-makings at church ales, bride ales and wakes, where custom prescribed and religion sanctified assemblies generally ending in drunkenness and often in grosser forms of debauchery'.⁵ Today the notion that puritans were pre-occupied with spoiling people's

sports still persists. A recent writer, commenting on the cutting down of a maypole at Yardley in Hertfordshire in 1602, concluded that those responsible for the action were 'doubtless kill-joy puritans'.⁶ On the other hand there have always been people prepared to challenge this unfavourable view of the puritans. Over seventy years ago Joseph Crouch, in a book called *Puritanism and Art: an Inquiry into a Popular Fallacy*, denied that puritans preached a 'gospel of gloom' and said that 'the suggestion that the puritans objected to the innocent amusements of the people is one of the commonest of slanders'.⁷ His cudgels were later taken up by Percy Scholes, who assembled a mass of evidence in support of his contention that puritans loved music as much as anyone else.⁸ And in recent years their greatest champion has been Christopher Hill, who believes that historians are wrong to attribute to pre-Civil War puritans the life-denying philosophy of later nonconformists. The puritans, he insists, were not puritanical, and he claims that recent work on early Stuart drama has 'effectively demolished' the traditional 'kill-joy' image of puritanism.⁹ It is because I am not convinced about the effectiveness of such demolition-work that I have chosen in this lecture to take a closer look at the relationship between puritanism and popular culture. But I do so with a certain diffidence, for I am reluctant to add to the already plentiful literature on puritanism. 'Puritan' is one of the most over-worked words in the vocabulary of English ecclesiastical history and in this lecture I shall use it as sparingly as possible. In fact during the first half of it I shall not use it at all. I shall reverse the order of proceedings promised in my title and talk first about popular culture and the attitudes that people took towards it: only near the end will I venture to ask whether any of these attitudes may be regarded as characteristically puritan.

'Popular culture' is used here as a convenient synonym for that wide range of recreational activities which English people enjoyed in their spare time. In the later middle ages many of these were associated with religious festivals and were freely permitted and sometimes actively encouraged by the Church. At least once a year it was customary for 'church-ales' to be held, at which people came together in large numbers to consume food and drink provided by the churchwardens and to participate in a variety of convivial

activities. In some parishes plays were performed, featuring Biblical characters or those ever popular folk-heroes, Robin Hood and Maid Marian. In others there was music and dancing or the playing of ritual games. The evidence can be found in surviving churchwardens' accounts, which record payments for the wages of the players and musicians and sometimes for the provision of coats and bells for morris dancers. Such payments were frequent at the beginning of the sixteenth century but were becoming rarer towards its end.¹⁰ One of the canons of 1604 expressly stated that ales should not be held in churches or churchyards.¹¹ This did not mean the end of church-ales, for they could still be held in a church-house or some other convenient building, but it did mean the beginning of the end of some long-standing links between popular festivities and the life of the parish church.

How and why did this change come about? We must not assume too readily that folk festivities disappeared because they were deliberately suppressed. Sometimes the explanation for their disappearance is a purely an economic one. Church-ales were becoming less profitable: expenditure on food and drink went up with inflation but receipts did not always keep pace. It was for this reason that some churchwardens decided to look for more effective methods of fund-raising: some organised collections for church expenses; others introduced a system of parochial rates.¹² There are parallels with our own times. Will future historians realise that the disappearance of the church bazaar in the second half of the twentieth century was not due to a cultural or religious upheaval but rather to the adoption of more effective fund-raising schemes such as Christian Stewardship?

Nevertheless, economic explanations are by themselves always inadequate. There is no doubt that in many places the old practices were discontinued because they were disliked. Evidence of such dislike is plentiful. No-one has ever tried to count the sermons preached against the abuses of dancing, drama and other such devilish devices, but scores of examples survive — and it is certain that hundreds more never got into print. John Walsal gave the impression that by the middle of Elizabeth's reign there was already a clerical campaign to put down the pestiferous practice. In 1578 he spoke of 'godly preachers which openly in sermons, privately by

supplications and every way have laboured for the suppressing of this notable cause of many mischievous inconveniences'.¹³ Fifty years later Richard Rawlidge, referring to the evils of bear-baiting, football, stoolball and other sports, said that 'those public exercises are left off by reason that the preachers of the land did so inveigh against them'.¹⁴ As well as sermons there were numerous books and pamphlets devoted to a denunciation of popular diversions. Robert Burton, writing in the 1620s, said that 'these sports have many oppugners, whole volumes writ against them'.¹⁵ In addition to the 'whole volumes' there were sections of many other volumes that dealt with the subject. In fact it would be hard to name any treatise of practical divinity written in this period that did not contain some reference to the dangers of the devil's dance. Among such treatises by far and away the most influential were those penned by William Perkins of Cambridge. Perkins disapproved strongly of most of the pastimes popular in his day and expressed his feelings in his lectures and writings. This great moral theologian, whom contemporaries likened to a second Moses, inspired a whole generation of godly preachers. A former pupil said that he did 'exceeding great good by his advice and direction to many ministers in the country who did resort to him from everywhere'.¹⁶ Many more who never met him knew him through his mighty written works: by the time of his death in 1602 'he had replaced Calvin and Beza near the top of the English religious best-seller list'.¹⁷ Over twenty years after his death Edward Bagshaw said that 'the precious name of Master Perkins shall, like an ointment poured forth, fill all the quarters of this land with a fresh and fragrant sweetness'.¹⁸ Not everyone would have put it quite like this but even those least sympathetic to his views could not deny the greatness of his influence. A ballad circulated in Stratford-on-Avon in 1619 suggested that the taking down of the maypole in that town had been done at the behest of one of his disciples.

Yet these men are true religious without quirks,
For one of the chiefest hath read far in Perkins' works.¹⁹

'One of the chiefest' was probably Thomas Wilson, who had recently become vicar of Stratford and had embarked upon an ambitious programme of moral and religious reform, causing numerous parishioners to be presented before the local church

court for dancing, play-acting and participating in various other unruly midsummer festivities.²⁰ He is but one of a number of known examples of 'new brooms' trying to sweep their parishes clean. Soon after Owen Stockton became vicar of the Sussex parish of Rudgwick in 1611 in succession to an old-style parson who had served the cure since 1576, 25 men were presented to the archdeaconry court for setting up a maypole in the churchyard.²¹ Similar things happened at Wlye in Wiltshire after a new minister arrived in 1620 as successor to an easy-going character who had been there for nearly forty years: a substantial proportion of the adult male population found themselves charged with a variety of offences, including performing a play in the church at Christmas.²² There was an even bigger upheaval at Leeds after Alexander Cooke became vicar in 1615. Cooke was determined to suppress the old festivities and a group of his supporters, known as the 'confederates', were eager to assist him. On one occasion, it was alleged, they attacked the musicians who were playing at a rush-bearing and proceeded to 'cut in pieces their drums, pipes and other instruments of music, cast them under their feet and break them in pieces', and in so doing 'raised great hurly-burly and disquiet amongst the people'.²³ But it was not always the clergy who took the lead in the suppression of such festivities. In some cases the initiative lay with the laity. At Tarvin in Cheshire in James I's reign the attack on the wakes was led by the local squire, John Bruen. Several years running, when the time for the wakes came round, he invited a group of preachers to spend three days preaching and praying in the church, 'so as the pipers and fiddlers and bear-wards and players and gamesters had no time left them for their vanities, but went away with great fretting'.²⁴

Why was there so much hostility to popular festivities at this period? Partly it was because they were disorderly. Municipal bodies in particular disliked May day celebrations because they could lead to disturbances of the peace. In the early years of Henry VIII's reign the London authorities had prohibited the erection of the city maypole because of the riots that had occurred on 'Evil May Day' 1517.²⁵ Whitsuntide too had an evil reputation: where two or three hundred people were gathered together and the Whitsun ale flowed freely things had a habit of getting out of

control.²⁶ In Elizabethan and early Stuart times the Somerset J.P.s wished to suppress all church-ales because they were 'to the great prejudice of the peace, plenty and good government of the county'.²⁷ Similar considerations led local authorities to condemn plays: their performance caused the convergence of crowds that were difficult to control and often occasioned crime and disorder. Henry Crosse said that London theatre audiences were 'for the most part the lewdest persons in the land, apt for pilfery, perjury, forgery or any roguery — the very scum, rascality and baggage of the people, thieves, cutpurses, shifters, coseners; briefly, an unclean generation and spawn of vipers.'²⁸ Football matches were also said to attract large crowds of hooligans. In those days, according to Philip Stubbes, football was less of a sport than 'a friendly kind of fight',²⁹ and players and supporters were sometimes seriously injured. In 1624 a man was killed at Aston-on-Trent when Aston were playing Castle Donington at home.³⁰ Even cricket, that most gentlemanly of games, could be disorderly: those wielding the willow in the churchyard at Boxgrove in Sussex on 5 May 1622 were presented to the archdeaconry court because 'they use to break the church windows with the ball' and (more dangerous still) 'a little child had like to have her brains beaten out with a cricket bat'.³¹

Those who believe that fear of disorder provided the strongest motive for the suppression of popular sports are sometimes inclined to see things in terms of a class struggle. The suggestion is that, while the sports remained popular with the poor and disreputable, they were frowned upon by the wealthier, more respectable members of the community who, with property to protect and business interests to sustain, were concerned about the maintenance of good order.³² In other words the prohibition of popular pastimes is seen as an aspect of attempt by the 'bourgeoisie' to suppress the aspirations of the 'proletariat'. It is a plausible theory but it does not always fit the facts. It does not fit the facts of life in Leeds, Stratford and a number of other places where communities were then culturally divided. At Leeds those who wished to suppress the old festivities were opposed by 'divers of the richest and greatest traders of the said town'.³³ At Stratford Wilson's opponents included five gentlemen, four yeomen and

several prominent tradesmen.³⁴ At Rudgwick those who erected the maypole in the churchyard included several of the most prosperous inhabitants of the parish.³⁵ There are no indications here that the lower classes saw the maypole as a ‘symbol of independence of their betters’.³⁶ Those who see the suppression of popular pastimes in terms of class conflict are, as Patrick Collinson has recently observed, positing a polarity of culture that did not yet exist, ‘as if only the poor and disreputable enjoyed a drink, or the children of the poor a romp on Sundays’.³⁷

It was precisely because so much drinking and romping took place on a Sunday, normally the only day in the week when people were free to indulge themselves in this way, that many churchmen were so strongly opposed to such pastimes. All too often these activities led to a breach of that modified version of the fourth commandment which was one of the foundation stones of the English church: ‘Thou shalt attend thy parish church every Sunday, sit in the place appointed to thee and listen attentively to what thou art told.’ Elizabethan preachers were loud in their condemnation of recreations that kept people away from church. Humphrey Roberts complained that on some Sundays only a handful of the old and the lame were in the congregation, for the rest had gone ‘to follow the devil’s dance’.³⁸ John Stockwood lambasted the minstrels who ‘pipe away all our audience in many places — so pleasant a thing is to dance after the devil’.³⁹ John Walsal was equally critical of stage players: ‘As in the country minstrels thus seduce and bewitch the people, so it hath been said (I trust it be reformed) that vain players have had about this city of London far greater audience than true preachers.’⁴⁰ But things could be even worse if, instead of gambolling on the village green in service time, people brought their bacchanalian orgies into the church. One can well understand the objections of the minister of Aldborough in West Yorkshire to the old Epiphany customs that still survived in his parish: In 1597 a group of villagers who had been up all night drinking brought their ‘mammet’ into the church on a barrow during divine service, ‘with such a noise of piping, blowing of an horn, ringing or striking of basins, and shouting of people that the minister was constrained to leave off reading of prayer’.⁴¹ Even without the cacophony such interruptions could be most annoying. William Dyke, preaching

against Whitsun ales in Hertfordshire in 1589, referred disapprovingly to 'Maid Marian coming into the church at the time of prayer and preaching, to move laughter with kissing in the church'.⁴²

Dyke, however, was a thoroughgoing sabbatarian who condemned all sports on Sundays even if they took place outside normal service times. He was one of a growing number of Elizabethan divines who took the fourth commandment very seriously indeed — who believed that the whole of Sunday should be given over to godly exercises. As is well known, total abstinence from sporting, gaming and dancing on the Sabbath was advocated in countless sermons, pamphlets and devotional works.⁴³ It was a major theme of that most influential guide to the Christian life, Lewis Bayly's *The Practise of Pietie*, which was first published early in James I's reign and went into 35 editions before 1635. 'Who,' he asks, 'can endure to see how in most places Christians keep the Lord's day as if they celebrated a feast rather to Bacchus than to the honour of the Lord Jesus, the saviour and redeemer of the world?' He implored his readers to consider 'whether dancing, stage-playing, masking, carding, dicing, tabling, chessplaying, bowling, shooting, bear-baiting, carousing, tippling and such other fooleries of Robin Hood, morris-dances, wakes and May-games be exercises that God will bless and allow on the Sabbath day'. Clearly the answer had to be 'No', and for one very special reason: it was certain, he said, that the Lord's second coming would take place on the Lord's day. How distressed people would be if Jesus at his coming were to find them indulging in 'carnal sports' when they ought to be engaged in 'spiritual exercises'! 'The profanest wretch would then wish rather to be taken kneeling at prayers in the church than skipping like a goat in a dance.'⁴⁴ It is important, however, to put sabbatarianism into its proper context. Since Sunday was the day when dancing and other such activities generally took place it was inevitable that the commandment most frequently invoked in their condemnation should be the fourth. But most sabbatarians made it abundantly clear that they thought many of the practices that were sinful on Sundays to be sinful on other days too. Edward Elton said that while exercises that 'serve to the refreshing of the body and mind' — such as shooting, tennis, stoolball, wrestling

and running — were permissible on weekdays, some things that ‘go under the name of sports and recreations’ ought to be forbidden always. Into this category came certain kinds of dancing, which were ‘unlawful at all times’ and ‘much more unlawful’ on the Sabbath.⁴⁵ Nicholas Bownde, perhaps the most ardent sabbatarian of them all, said much the same. ‘May games and setting up of maypoles’ he regarded as ‘works of darkness’ that should never be allowed in a Christian commonwealth. It was a sin to have to do with such things at any time and a ‘double sin’ on Sunday.⁴⁶

Some of the godly preachers who condemned Sunday sports may have been less concerned with the breach of the fourth commandment than with the overthrow of what Samuel Bird called ‘the commandment wherein all uncleanness is forbidden’.⁴⁷ The commandment that he had in mind was the seventh: ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ As it stands the prohibition does not apply to ‘all uncleanness’: its purpose is much less ambitious and more specific — to protect the institution of marriage. But this period saw a remarkable widening of the seventh commandment’s scope. Perkins interpreted it as a condemnation of all things that ‘stir up lust’, even if the libidinous feelings are those that a man has towards his own wife: ‘Even in wedlock,’ he wrote, ‘excess in lusts is no better than plain adultery before God.’ Among the things which, in his view, stirred up lust and led to breaches of the seventh commandment were ‘vain love songs, ballads, interludes and amorous books’ as well as ‘lascivious representations of love matters in plays and comedies’ and ‘lascivious dancing of man and woman together’. He especially condemned mixed dancing: ‘This exercise cannot be numbered among things indifferent, for experience shows that it hath been usually either a fruit or a follower of great wickedness’.⁴⁸ Similarly, Richard Greenham said that while there was nothing necessarily wrong with men and women dancing separately, the ‘monstrous mixture of men and women’ was ‘a chief sin and arch-enemy to religion of our age’.⁴⁹ But it was George Widley who produced the most eloquent condemnation of the practice. Mixed dancing, he complained, had become the rage: ‘No sooner can the fiddler sound but straight we fall a-frisking, as if we had never felt our feet before that day.’ The consequences of the popularity of the practice were catastrophic:

For, cast a coal into flax, or a sparkle into tinder, or a burning match into gunpowder, bring fire into the wind, and you shall see how easily it burneth and bloweth up all. Now, as the coal is unto the flax, a sparkle unto tinder, a match to powder, wind to the fire, so are these sports to their nature, which is as soon set on fire as flax or tinder or gunpowder.⁵⁰

One can understand why he thought that maypoles should carry plague-bills, the Elizabethan equivalent to a 'government health warning'. Lust was contagious. William Ames said that the evil effects of dancing spread to those who stood by and watched it.⁵¹ John Northbrooke described a May day gathering, where mixed dancing went on far into the night, as a 'nursery of bastardy'.⁵² Historical demographers have since proved him wrong,⁵³ but that is beside the point. In any period of history it is not the truth, but what people believe to be the truth, that counts.

Some kinds of dancing were also condemned at this time because they were thought to be contrary to the second commandment. Perkins said that the prohibition of the worship of graven images extended to 'all such dancing, processions, plays and such feasts as are consecrated to the memorial and honour of idols'.⁵⁴ Stubbess was more specific. He said that some dances were disallowed because they 'sprang from the heathen, idolatrous pagans and infidels who, having offered up their sacrifices, victimats and holocausts to their false gods . . . used to dance, leap and skip before them'.⁵⁵ Clearly he was not thinking of the new courtly dances that were becoming popular with the gentry but of the old folk dances of the countryside, especially morris-dances. Morris dancing was in fact singled out for condemnation in 1618 by the minister of Marlborough in Wiltshire, who said that those who participated 'served the devil by it and not God, and that it was an idol which they served'.⁵⁶ Generally, however, it was dancing round maypoles that was condemned as idolatrous. John Hammond, the minister at Bewdley in Worcestershire in James I's time who was alleged to have devoted his energies to the 'battering down of the vanities of the Gentiles', likened the bird on the top of the maypole to the golden calf condemned by Moses at Mount Horeb.⁵⁷ Similarly Mistress Yard, a pious wife of Wells, called the maypole

there — which was covered in red and white spots — a ‘painted calf’. In May 1607, when the pole was put up in the street near her house, she refused to go to church because she could not bring herself to walk past it. Her behaviour prompted some local humorists to paint a picture of a red and white spotted calf on a board and parade it through the town: when the party halted outside the Yards’ house they bawled out ‘ba, ba, like a calf’. The lady was not amused, nor presumably would anyone else have been who took the second commandment so seriously.⁵⁸

There were other commandments besides the second, fourth and seventh which people believed to be broken by those who took part in popular festivities. William Prynne, never one to underestimate a case, said that dancing involved a breach of all ten commandments: the third was broken ‘in that oaths are frequent amongst dancers’ and the fifth because dancing led young people to enter into ‘bargains’ without their parents’ advice; most of the other supposed breaches are too far-fetched to mention.⁵⁹ In addition there was another prohibition which, although it had no place in the Decalogue, was often on men’s lips in those days: ‘Thou shalt not waste time.’ This was a commandment broken daily by almost everyone in the land. ‘Thousands there are,’ said Robert Bolton, ‘who plunge themselves over head and ears in courses of pleasure which they call recreations, wherein they very unworthily and woefully waste the fat and marrow, as it were, of dear and precious time.’⁶⁰ Samuel Bird went further and complained that people wasted time not only in playing games but in talking about games when they were not actually playing them. ‘What a miserable life is this’, he said, ‘that when there are so many good things to enquire after, yet that men should choose to spend all their thoughts upon so vile and so base a thing as play is.’⁶¹ If games and sports wasted time they also wasted energy. Christopher Fetherston claimed that dancing resulted in total exhaustion: ‘How many men’s servants, being set to work, do after their dancing days lie snorting in hedges because they are so weary that they cannot work — whereby their masters do reap but small gains.’ In some severe cases, he said, dancers became maimed for life: men who in their youth were able to ‘leap over logs’ found that they were unable later in life even to ‘step over straws’.⁶² Several writers also condemned popular

pastimes because they were a waste of money. Samuel Bird and John Rainolds both thought that the money spent on recreations would be better bestowed in alms, while William Ames calculated that 'with the charges that are laid out upon one stage play many poor may be sustained some months'.⁶³ But perhaps the most remarkable statement about the wastefulness of popular pastimes was made by Hugh Roberts, who complained that some kinds of dancing led to a waste of precious natural resources. Echoing the common Tudor concern about the need to conserve timber he attacked the custom of cutting down the most flourishing trees to make maypoles. 'God created not the trees of the wood to be cut down and set up again for gazing stocks', he said:

Maypolers are caterpillars to the commonwealth, for they make destruction of the fairest young trees which, if they were suffered to grow, would in time be good timber for necessary uses.⁶⁴

Such conservationist sentiments have a twentieth century ring. So too do those of the preachers and writers who complained that some popular sports involved the unnecessary exploitation of animals. Macaulay's jibe that godly folk objected to bear-baiting, not because it involved cruelty to the bears but because it gave pleasure to the spectators may contain a grain of truth. But it is far from being the whole truth. Stubbes implored his readers to remember that bears were God's creatures: 'What Christian heart,' he asked, 'can take pleasure to see one poor beast to rent, tear and kill another — and all for his foolish pleasure?'⁶⁵ John Field also considered bear-baiting to be a 'cruel and loathsome exercise',⁶⁶ while Bolton condemned those who 'make merry with the bleeding miseries of bears'. 'Alas, sinful man, what an heart hast thou, that canst take delight in the cruel tormenting of a dumb creature!'⁶⁷ Bird, who averred that Christ 'abhorreth all kind of cruelty', thought that some popular games also involved cruelty to humans. That was why he condemned the traditional Hocktide game in which a gang of women roamed round the town with a long rope in their hands seeking to capture the men: he thought that to 'bind and otherwise to abuse such men as they can master' could involve cruelty. There may have been some unconscious sex discrimination here, for he made no complaint about the other version of the same

game in which the men went round with a long rope trying to bind the women. He was perhaps on firmer ground when he suggested that an apparently innocent game such as 'hinch, pinch and laugh not' was cruel because it singled out one or two unfortunate individuals and turned them into laughing-stocks. Since he cited *Leviticus* 19.14 as a relevant text he may have been thinking of instances where people made fun of the deaf and the blind.⁶⁸

As one would expect, those who attacked traditional sports and pastimes cited a great number of Biblical texts in addition to the Commandments. Naturally the Pentateuch provided some of the most appropriate passages, such as *Deuteronomy* 22.5 which, with its uncompromising condemnation of transvestism, showed that the practice of men dressing up as Maid Marian or any other female character was utterly prohibited.⁶⁹ But the greatest armoury of texts was assembled for the onslaught upon dancing. Widley cited three examples from the Old Testament of the ways in which the wrath of God fell upon people as they danced.⁷⁰ Gervase Babington quoted Calvin's sermon on *Job* 21.11, a text that was thought to establish a clear connection between dancing and devilry.⁷¹ In the New Testament the favourite passage was the account of Herodias' daughter dancing before Herod: a marginal note against it in the Geneva Bible invites readers to consider 'what inconvenience cometh by wanton dancing'.⁷² But the Bible could not always be relied upon to confirm a preacher's prejudices. John Northbrooke was obliged to dismiss as metaphorical the passage in *Luke* where those who were deaf to the gospel call are likened to children who hear the music of the piper but will not dance.⁷³

Another text that presented difficulties to the godly preachers was the one in *Ecclesiastes* which suggests that, just as there is a time to mourn, there is also a time to dance.⁷⁴ This in fact was a favourite text with clergymen who saw no harm in popular sports and pastimes. Dancing did in fact have many clerical defenders. One of the most celebrated was Robert Burton who said that he 'was ever of that mind, those May-games, wakes and Whitsun ales, etc., if they be not at unseasonable hours, may justly be permitted. Let them freely feast, sing and dance, have their poppet-plays, hobby-horses, tabors, crowds, bagpipes, etc., play at ball and barley-breaks and what sports and recreations they like best.' He

disagreed with the idea that mixed dancing should be forbidden because it provoked lust: 'They may as well . . . cut down all vines, forbid the drinking of wine, for that it makes some men drunk.'⁷⁵ Another clergyman who defended rural sports was Robert Herrick, who counted such things among the peculiar blessings of the countryside:

For Sports, for Pagentrie, and Playes
Thou hast thy Eves and Holydays:
On which the young men and maids meet,
To exercise their dancing feet:
Tripping the comely country round,
With Daffadils and Daisies crown'd.
Thy Wakes, thy Quintels, here thou hast,
Thy May-poles too with Garlands grac't:
Thy Morris-dance; thy Whitsun-ale;
Thy Sheering-feast, which never faile.⁷⁶

Herrick's enthusiasm was shared by another clerical poet Richard Corbett, successively bishop of Oxford and Norwich and himself an accomplished ballad-singer: he wrote a piece ridiculing William Hammond, the zealous batterer of maypoles at Bewdley.⁷⁷ And in the diocese of Bath and Wells 72 clergymen supported Bishop Pierce when he wrote in defence of church-ales in 1633.⁷⁸ Pierce was a close ally of Archbishop Laud, who that year promoted the publication of the Declaration of Sports — a revised version of the one that James I had issued in 1618. The 'Book of Sports', as it was popularly (or unpopularly) known, expressly permitted people to participate in wakes, ales, May-games, dancing, leaping, vaulting and other popular recreations: the only activities prohibited were bear-baiting, bull-baiting and interludes (all of which had been declared unlawful on Sundays in a statute of 1625) and, in the case of 'the meaner sort of people', bowls. Bowls had been declared unlawful at all times except Christmas in an act of 1542, on the grounds that the sport took up the time that ought to be devoted to archery. Even in the 1630s archery still had its military uses; one reason given for the issue of the Declaration was the need for men to use 'such exercises as may make their bodies more able for war'.⁷⁹ But the most commonly expressed justification for the retention of popular sports and pastimes was that they fostered

good-fellowship. Innocent Read of Redbourn, Hertfordshire, son of the local squire, defended the Whitsuntide ales there as 'a neighbourly meeting or feast in the church house . . . where they have made merry together to the maintenance and increase of love and charity amongst them'.⁸⁰ Perkins said that it was a 'common opinion' that 'drinking and bezdling in the alehouse or tavern is good fellowship and shows a good, kind nature and maintains neighbourhood'.⁸¹ And similar sentiments are put into the mouths of the villagers who put the plain man's point of view in the dialogues constructed by George Gifford and Arthur Dent.⁸² By the 1630s it seems that 'good-fellowship' had become a rallying-cry for those who wished to defend the old social customs: many viewed the 'good-fellow pastor' who would drink in an alehouse or play a game of cards or bowls as a preferable alternative to the straitlaced puritan divines.⁸³

My use of the words 'strait-laced' and 'puritan' brings me back to the question I raised at the outset. Is it permissible to talk about a conflict between puritanism and popular culture in the seventy years before the Civil War? The answer depends, as the late C. E. M. Joad used to say, upon what we mean by 'puritanism'.⁸⁴ There have been many attempts to define the term, but perhaps the most successful was one of the first — that made by Henry Parker in his *Discourse concerning Puritans*, published in 1641. Parker said that in his day the word was used in four different ways. There were 'ecclesiastical puritans' who wished to purge the church of 'a pompous or ceremonious kind of discipline . . . like unto the Romish'. There were 'puritans in religion' who were 'red-fire hot' in their anti-papal zeal. Then there were 'political puritans' who were opposed to Charles I's policies in church and state. Finally there were 'ethical puritans' or 'puritans in morality' who emphasised the virtues of truth and goodness and holiness. He was not of course suggesting that these four categories were mutually exclusive: one man might conceivably fit into all four. He made it clear that the whole process of categorisation was highly subjective: 'He which tells you who is a puritan, for the most part tells what is a puritan.' Clearly 'puritan' was a term of abuse that was used by different people in different ways. And, what is more, it was a term whose compass had expanded greatly since it was first introduced

into the language. In the beginning, said Parker, all puritans were ecclesiastical ones: the religious, political and ethical species appeared later.⁸⁵

There is no doubt that many of those most vehemently opposed to traditional sports and games were puritans in the ecclesiastical sense of the term. Some, like Field, Dyke and Gifford, were extremists who sought to change not only the ceremonies but also the whole structure of the church.⁸⁶ To them it seemed that the only way to reform society was to set up a fully reformed national church. Only a church in which godly divines could freely administer godly discipline would be able to purge the land of the 'lewd customs' that corrupted the life of the parishes. They regarded the antiquated system of ecclesiastical jurisdiction that had survived from the days of popery as a major obstacle to the progress of social reformation. Few puritan ministers were as fortunate as Thomas Wilson who, as vicar of Stratford, presided over the 'peculiar' church court that met in that town and was thus able to bypass the regular judicial machinery and administer discipline directly in his own parish. He could wage his war against maypoles and morris dancing from a position of great strength, for in matters ecclesiastical he was policeman, prosecutor and judge.⁸⁷ His actions offended not only many of his parishioners but also his bishop who in 1636 complained that the vicar had striven to 'shake the jurisdiction of me his ordinary' and to 'govern the people and town of Stratford . . . as if he had been another Calvin or Beza in Geneva'.⁸⁸ However, it would be absurd to pretend that all opponents of the traditional sports and games were ecclesiastical puritans. Not all those working for a reformation of society regarded a reformation of the church's institutions and ceremonies as an essential pre-requisite. Some of those most opposed to the sports, such as Andrewes, Babington and Bayly, were in fact bishops:⁸⁹ indeed it could be argued that the true originator of the campaign against the sports was Archbishop Grindal who, as early as 1571, had included questions about morris dancers, May gamesters and Lords of Misrule in his visitation articles for the Province of York.⁹⁰ In the 1580s his example was followed by the bishops of Chester, Chichester, Coventry and Lichfield, Hereford and Lincoln.⁹¹

Many of those opposed to the sports were likely to come into Parker's second category of 'puritans in religion' — those who were fanatically anti-Catholic — for both popery and popular culture were deemed to be of the devil's devising. It was often pointed out that the old festivities were most faithfully maintained in those parts of the country where the old religion still held sway. Hugh Roberts believed that 'our adversaries, the Pope and his seminaries' were actively encouraging the erection of maypoles. 'Wheresoever such banners do stand', he said, 'there are many wavering and ignorant people not yet instructed nor settled in religion' who 'like better of the mass than of the gospel'.⁹² The notion that the perpetuation of popular pastimes was all part of a popish plot was particularly prevalent in Lancashire, where papists were especially thick on the ground. William Harrison alleged that the papists paid pipers to play for dancing on Sundays in order to lure people away from divine service.⁹³ Another Lancashire minister, John White, was convinced that 'papists have been the ringleaders in riotous companies, in drunken meetings . . . in stage-plays, greens, ales and all heathenish customs'.⁹⁴ Sometimes the Catholic conspiracy theory took the most ridiculous forms. Arthur Dent was probably not joking when he suggested that the publication of 'merry books' such as *The Court of Venus* and *The Palace of Pleasure* was all part of a pan-European plan to corrupt the minds of Protestants:

They were devised by the devil, seen and allowed by the Pope, printed in Hell, bound up by Hobgoblin and first published and dispersed in Rome, Italy and Spain. And all to this end, that thereby men might be kept from the reading of the Scriptures.

In actual fact some Catholics were as hostile to popular pastimes as the hottest Protestants. One of those who objected strongly to the old Christmas custom of bringing a hobby-horse into the house was William Weston, who from 1584 was the Superior of the Jesuit mission in England.*

Parker's third category — the 'political puritans' — need not detain us long. Because Archbishop Laud and his allies came to refer to nearly all who opposed the government as 'puritans' the number so designated became so large that it constituted a high

proportion of the political nation. It comes therefore as no surprise to discover that few such people 'had the kill-joy qualities given to all the puritans by later legend'.⁹⁷ Nor is it really remarkable that 'the majority of Long Parliament M.P.s could not be induced to attend afternoon sittings because they spent their time at the theatre, the park or the bowling green'⁹⁸ — since the majority of these men were not puritans in any more than a very general 'political' sense.

Henry Parker, however, made it clear that in common parlance the word 'puritan' was used rather more selectively. 'Those whom we *ordinarily* call puritans,' he wrote, 'are men of strict life and precise opinions.' And again, 'the most *ordinary* badge of puritans is their more religious and conscientious conversation'.⁹⁹ In other words 'puritan' was most commonly used in a moral sense. It was the abusive nickname which the rude multitude, and especially the 'stage-poets, minstrels and the jesting buffoons of the age', gave to the holy and good. Parker suggested that 'puritans in morality' had come into being by 'a new enlargement of the name',¹⁰⁰ but in fact examples of such usage can be found fifty years before the time at which he was writing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the first printed example of the use of the word 'puritan' in a distinctively ethical sense is found in 1592.¹⁰¹ By the mid-1590s it was being used in Kent as a synonym for 'spoil-sport' or 'kill-joy': a Harbledown woman slung the epithet at another villager who objected to morris-dancing.¹⁰² At about this time too the word became current in Oxford: it was said of Robert Bolton, then an unregenerate undergraduate, that he would 'fetch within the compass of puritans' all who disapproved of stage-plays, cards and dice.¹⁰³ In the early years of the seventeenth century such usage became widespread and 'puritan' became part of the stock-in-trade of satirists and social commentators.¹⁰⁴ John Earle said that the poor fiddler who tried to earn a living playing at country weddings and Whitsun ales 'hates naturally the puritan as an enemy to this mirth' — and presumably also as a threat to his livelihood.¹⁰⁵ Those responsible for the taking down the Stratford maypole in 1619 were described in a contemporary ballad as 'the old biting and young sucking puritans'.¹⁰⁶ And in the following year the odious nickname was attached to the clergyman who was trying to suppress dancing

at Wylie. One of his women parishioners is alleged to have said:

We had a good parson here before but now we have a puritan . . . A plague or a pox on him that ever he did come hither . . . I would we had kept our old parson, for he did never dislike with (games and dances) . . . These proud puritans are up at the top now but I hope they will have a time to come as fast down as ever they came up.¹⁰⁷

It will be remembered that it was in this period too that Richard Baxter's father, that godly Shropshire yeoman who disapproved so strongly of maypole dancing, was 'made the derision of the vulgar rabble under the odious name of a puritan'.¹⁰⁸

In the half century before the Civil War there is no doubt that in common parlance the word 'puritan' came to have a definite moral connotation. To most people a puritan was one who endeavoured to lead a sin-free life and to persuade others to do likewise. And to many it appeared that, although he himself had repudiated the name, the greatest exponent of puritanism was William Perkins. Now Perkins, 'that prince of puritan divines',¹⁰⁹ although he disliked many of the Prayer Book ceremonies and at one time inclined towards presbyterianism, was not a strong puritan in the ecclesiastical sense of the word. And although he wrote much against the errors of Rome he was perhaps not fanatical enough in his anti-popery to qualify as a 'puritan in religion'. Nor, since he died in 1602, did he live long enough to become a 'political' one. He was, one might say, the 'ethical puritan' *par excellence*. He was, as we have seen, the most prolific and influential of all the professors of practical divinity teaching and preaching and writing at the time. No-one did more to advance the cause of godliness or to denounce the claims of 'good-fellowship'. If we wish to understand the nature of the conflict between ethical puritanism and popular culture we can do no better than to try to stand where Perkins stood and to look out on the world through his eyes.

When Perkins looked out on the world and saw people going about their pleasureable pastimes he may have thought to himself: 'There but for the grace of God go I.' For, like many ethical puritans, he was a reformed sinner who had once been much addicted to the vice of good-fellowship: in his undergraduate days, it is said, he

had been known as 'drunken Perkins'; he had led a dissolute life and may even have fathered an illegitimate child.¹¹⁰ After his conversion he had become a new creature but the memory of his past misdeeds could not easily be wiped away. It is likely that the sound of sensuous music and the sight of 'wanton dancing' aroused unwelcome feelings within him. Like John Northbrooke, he knew how dancing could stir up 'that thing which is to be suppressed and kept under with great study and industry'.¹¹¹ As we have seen, he condemned such activities because they stirred up lust. For Perkins the campaign against May games and Whitsun ales was an externalisation of that 'combat between Christ and the devil' which, he believed, was taking place within the soul of man. He agreed with the idea that the ring of dancers round the maypole was 'a circle whose centre was the devil'.¹¹² He felt out of harmony with the movement and rhythm of popular music and dance. Such things belonged to what Perry Miller called the 'order of things that exists by inevitable equilibrium, that is fulfilled by unconscious and aimless motions' — the order that puritans wished to replace by one founded upon conscious decision and rational choice.¹¹³ This was the truly godly order and its establishment meant that not only folk music and dancing but anything belonging to the realm of 'unconscious and aimless motions' had to be carefully controlled. This included all merriment and laughter. 'As for laughter', wrote Perkins, 'it may be used: otherwise God would never have given that power and faculty unto man, but the use of it must be both moderate and seldom, as sorrow for our sins is to be plentiful and often. This we may learn in Christ's example, of whom we read that he wept three times . . . but we never read that he laughed.' And he reminded his readers of the saying of St. Chrysostom that 'to move laughter in the church is the work of the devil'.¹¹⁴

If Perkins was indeed a representative puritan there seems to be some truth in the old notion that puritanism and popular culture were incompatible. There is little doubt that the people called puritans were generally opposed to the old sports and pastimes — or, to put it the other way round, many of those who opposed the old sports and pastimes were called puritans precisely because they took such a stand. Of course there were plenty of other people who were not called puritans who also took exception to May games,

Whitsun ales and midsummer dances, and who did so for severely practical reasons. In a period which saw growing concern about crime and disorder it was only natural that many should look askance upon any gatherings of people that were rowdy and hard to control, especially if the proceedings were presided over by a character called a 'Lord of Misrule'. But it is clear that the real driving force behind the attack on the old customs was provided by the people called puritans, for their antipathy stemmed not from considerations of expediency but from deep inner conviction. They had declared war upon the devil and all his works and every manifestation of his evil influence had to be fought against, whether it was the rising up of lust within the heart or the erection of a maypole on a village green. It was the devil, not Christ, who was the lord of the dance.

But it would be wrong to suggest that all puritans were men like William Hammond of Bewdley or Thomas Wilson of Stratford, who devoted their energies to battering down maypoles. Maypoles were merely the outward symbols (and symptoms) of an inner, spiritual disorder. The real battle was to be fought, not upon the village green but in the heart and soul of man. Self-control took priority over social control. The prime task was to strengthen people's resistance to evil. Resisting the devil's temptations, according to Daniel Dyke, involved the mortification of the 'fleshly members', which are 'the eye and the ear of old Adam'.

We have to pluck out that eye of ours that is so much affected with the beauty of that golden idol and to circumcise that ear of ours that is too much delighted with the devil's sweet music . . . Yea, so to be crucified with Christ that our nature may be quite altered and changed, so that now these worldly things may no more move us than hay would do a lion.¹¹⁵

I am aware that in this lecture I have dealt much in generalities and have not paid enough attention to those 'minute particulars' of which real history is made. And so I wish in conclusion to return to the particular event with which I began and to look rather more closely at that little local mystery of the cutting down of the Warbleton maypole. What was at issue? According to the entry in the Warbleton parish register a man was killed while 'stealing of a

maypole',¹¹⁶ but it is unlikely that this was a simple case of theft. Although the dead man was a carpenter by trade it is almost certain that his major motive was not the gratuitous acquisition of a useful piece of timber: in the densely wooded Sussex Weald there was plenty to be obtained much more easily elsewhere. Nor is it probable that he was merely a participant in some light-hearted nocturnal prank: he was a newly married man, his wife was pregnant and his home was over six miles away.¹¹⁷ It must have been some deadly serious purpose that caused him to come all that way at that late hour to engage in such a risky undertaking. Perhaps after all the most likely explanation of his behaviour is that he detested maypoles, regarding them as emblems of idolatry and as occasions of sin. He was an inhabitant of Hailsham, a town noted for its sturdy iconoclasm: at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign local people smashed the images in the church there and caused such a commotion that it came to the ears of the Privy Council in London.¹¹⁸ And it is probable that Noah Spynner, for that was the carpenter's name, had been bred up in a devoutly Protestant home: for who but devout Bible-reading Protestants would call a boy Noah? Presumably they had done so in pious hope that, like his illustrious namesake, he would renounce devilry, take up carpentry and listen attentively to God's commands. All this, of course, is pure speculation. But I find it hard to resist the conclusion that this assault upon a maypole — the earliest case of the kind that I have come across so far¹¹⁹ — marked the beginning of a holy war against the devil's dance and that the otherwise unknown Noah Spynner was the first martyr in that cause.

NOTES

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 92. Roberts, *Day of Hearing*, sig. K 7-8.
 93. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p.157.
 94. J. White, *Workes* (London 1624), pp.111-12; C. Haigh, 'Puritan Evangelism in the Reign of Elizabeth I', *English Historical Review*, vol. xcii (1977), pp.53-4.
 95. Dent, *op. cit.*, pp.394-5.
 96. P. McGrath, *Papists and Puritans under Elizabeth I* (London 1967), pp.278-9. cf. P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London 1978), pp.221-2.
 97. V. Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution* (London 1961), p.279.
 98. C. Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments* (Oxford 1971), p.167.
 99. Parker, *op. cit.*, pp.11, 58; my italics. At this period 'conversation' meant 'behaviour'.
 100. *Ibid.*, pp.13, 58-9.
 101. It occurs in Robert Greene's pamphlet *The Repentance* (London 1592), sig. C 3r.
 102. Clark, *op. cit.*, p.176.
 103. Bagshaw, *op. cit.*, sig. b 3v.
 104. W. P. Holden, *Anti-Puritan Satire 1572-1642* (London 1954), pp.101, 141-2.
 105. J. Earle, *Micro-cosmographie* (5th ed., London 1629, repr. 1868), p.88.
 106. Sisson, *op. cit.*, p.195.
 107. Ingram, *op. cit.*, pp.106-7.
 108. J. M. Lloyd-Thomas (editor), *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, Everyman's Library (London 1931), pp.4, 6.
 109. P. Collinson, *A Mirror of Elizabethan Puritanism* (Friends of Dr. Williams's Library 17th Lecture, 1963), p.7.
 110. B. Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (London 1813), vol. ii, p.129; Breward, *op. cit.*, p.6; Porter, *op. cit.*, pp.271-2.
 111. Northbrooke, *op. cit.*, p.122.
 112. Perkins, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p.539.
 113. P. Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. 1954), p.398.
 114. Perkins, *op. cit.*, vol. i, p.448.
 115. D. Dyke, *Two Treatises* (London 1616), pp.327-9. Daniel was a son of William Dyke.
 116. East Sussex Record Office, PAR 501/1/1, f.6.
 117. His marriage took place at Hailsham in July 1571. A posthumous son, also named Noah, was born in September and buried in October 1572; E.S.R.O. PAR 353/1/1/1, ff.15-16. (I owe this reference to Betty Tupman.)
 118. *Acts of the Privy Council*, vol. vii, p.76.
 119. This refers only to standing maypoles. 1549 saw the destruction of the London maypole, which was stored beneath the eves of the houses in Shaft Alley in Aldgate ward. Its destruction was provoked by a sermon against idolatry preached at Paul's Cross; Stow, *op.cit.*, vol. i, pp.143-4.